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## Creating from within

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## 2. Interpersonal networking of freelancers: Seeking business friendships

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## **Abstract**

Network behaviors that regard the formation and maintenance of professional social relations have gained academic attention because of their resourcefulness for future gains. So far studies have treated all contexts equally in terms of how and why particular behaviors are observed. For this study I turn to investigate networking of freelancers. The data comprises 21 interviews, observations and archival data that are obtained from a professional network for freelanced professionals employed at Dutch infrastructure projects. In this context, I find that networking for freelancers serves a broad range of motives that is not limited to future gains: professional network membership gives a feeling of belonging, the possibility to participate in social activities and to learn from professionals in the field. In this case the rationale for networking of freelancers can be summarized by “seeking business friendships”. Business friendships are professional contacts with whom a personal click is felt. Networking, being it within the network or elsewhere, is further seen as a matter of give and take and business outcomes are not necessarily expected. This study shows how freelancers network and what professional network membership can mean to freelancers.

*Keywords:* cognition, freelancers, motivation and network behavior.

## 2.1 Introduction

Interpersonal networking is understood as the practice of relationship<sup>2</sup> building and relationship maintenance with individual others (Porter & Woo, 2015). Work concerned with this phenomenon describes how entrepreneurs and consultants engage in network actions and strategies that shape their interpersonal set of relations (Bensaou et al., 2014; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012; Vissa, 2012). By referring to networking as practice it is positioned against earlier deterministic accounts of social networks. In doing so, interpersonal networking explicates the role of the individual actor in generating individual level outcomes such as information and resources (Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012), referrals (Vissa, 2012) and career outcomes (Wolff & Moser, 2009). In this view actors are seen as agents who engage in networking because “it is useful and hence necessary” (Bensaou et al., 2014: 42) and we therefore inquired how such relationships can be formed efficiently (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012: 35).

To date, research seems to assume that the purposes of networking behaviors are to gain strategic outcomes. However, this does perhaps not hold for all contexts nor all individuals. Some argue that social interaction is just part of being human (Klyver et al., 2011) and that this also encompasses expressive and affective needs (Colbert et al., 2016; Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). Others say that individual actors may differ in their approaches towards networking based on their values and preferences (Casciaro et al., 2014; Grant, 2013; Landis, 2015) and that networking can be constrained by individually held perceptions. More research is needed to study the rationales of networking and to contextualize research findings with regards to this phenomenon (Casciaro et al., 2015; Porter & Woo, 2015). This can ultimately provide insight in how and why some actors receive outcomes while others do not.

To advance our understanding of how and why actors network, in this paper I study networking in the context of freelancers. In particular, I study what a professional network means for freelancers and how they network. Freelancers are entrepreneurs in the sense that they work for their own risk and reward, while their work often consists of providing intangible professional knowledge to existing companies that is not necessarily different from regular employees.<sup>3</sup> To them social networks are a critical component of career

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper I will use the term “tie”, “relationship”, “interaction” interchangeably to refer to the interaction between the actor and the alter.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I view this group as professionals as distinct from entrepreneurs whose output is inherently innovative and whom I view as preoccupied with “the existence, discovery, and exploitation of opportunities” to create new goods or services (Shane & Venkatamaram, 2000: 219).

success (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013; Gandini, 2016) as new projects emerge through their interpersonal relationships with others. Meanwhile, being self-employed emphasizes personally close practices (Brawley & Pury, 2017) that potentially are at odds with outcome oriented network actions. The research design employed for this paper was a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994) in which I theoretically sampled a professional network of freelancers. This implies that I preselected a particular network for the theoretical insights that this case could offer (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This network's members are freelancers or owners of a small business who are employed in temporary projects in the Dutch infrastructure sector. The freelancers hold individual level variation in experience and expertise, but they are all highly qualified knowledge workers.

The findings offer insights in how and why freelancers network in this context. Networking for freelancers encompasses a large personal and social component that perhaps otherwise would have been taken care of by colleagues. Being part of a professional network gives meaning to their work. I characterize their approach to networking as “seeking business friendships”. Business friendships are relations that mingle private and professional interactions. This networking approach is further characterized by letting go of expectations of immediate business outcomes and by emphasizing give and take. These business friendships are seen as fruitful approach for economic exchange as networking is based on personal title. This study complements existing approaches to networking by arguing that networking for freelancers is more than acquiring new projects. It relaxes the assumption that networking is goal-directed and advances our understanding of the psychology of networking in the context of freelancers.

## **2.2 Theoretical background**

### *2.2.1 Logic and meaning of interpersonal networking*

Recently, it has been acknowledged that organizational actors have the capability to craft their existing set of relationships, (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012; Vissa, 2012). A broad range of actions and strategies describe how individual actors build and shape their personal network. For instance, when it comes to interacting with others, consultants deploy different strategies, ranging from strategically planning interactions towards meeting on a need base only (Bensaou et al., 2014). Entrepreneurs can engage in both managing existing ties as well as adding new ties to their personal network (Vissa, 2012), or have strategies on the efficient formation of desired ties (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012). Zott and Huy (2007) further provide evidence that symbolic actions - actions that convey socially constructed

meanings - can provide various forms of legitimacy, thereby driving new tie formation to resource holders. These actions and strategies are positioned against earlier deterministic accounts of social network that assume path-dependence.

This behavioral approach put forward by these pioneering studies on interpersonal networking, does not give enough depth into the phenomenon. It treats networking from the outside and therefore lacks insights on how and why of networking behaviors are undertaken. It seems that these studies have inherited the perspective of social network research that actors are rational and strategic and that social relations serve instrumental needs (Carpenter et al., 2012). For instance, scholars silently assume that actors are strategic in the formation of ties (Stuart & Sorenson, 2007) and aim to do so efficiently (Hallen & Eisenhardt, 2012). It views interpersonal networking as conduit for job search, career management and work performance (Porter & Woo, 2015). However, this assumption may not reflect the ambiguous reality actors engage in and the perceptions that drive their actions.

Consequently, to get a perspective on networking from within, scholars have called “to extend our knowledge of what drives individuals to engage in networking behaviors” (Porter & Woo, 2015: 19). Hence, recent work on social networks has started to describe psychological dimensions such as motivations, cognition and affect as distinguishing factors when it comes to social networks (Casciaro et al., 2015; Landis, 2015). Actors may not be unified in the outcomes they seek from social relations, nor in their approach to do so. For instance, to some organizational actors, networking has a negative connotation when immediate needs are attached to it (Casciaro et al., 2014; Klyver et al., 2011) and networking can also serve needs that go beyond instrumental exchange (Colbert et al., 2016; Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). Some social relations can be a source of energy (Owens, Baker, Sumpter, & Cameron, 2016), while others may be energy depleting (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). Motives for networking can also overlap in particular approaches: “networking may be an interpersonal behavior that fulfills both the need for affiliation and for achieving/power” (Porter & Woo, 2015: 19). This leaves us with an incomplete understanding of this phenomenon and it calls for better comprehending the logic and rationales of particular networking approaches.

### 2.2.2 *The context of freelancers*

The context of freelancers deserves more scholarly attention. This group of professionals grows every year and comprises over one million in the Netherlands in 2016. Freelancers are somewhat in-between entrepreneurs and employees. They are hired by organizations on a project-by-project base and personally responsible for acquiring new projects. Their ways of working may be different from larger companies and focus more on informal practices and personally close interactions (Brawley & Pury, 2017). We need insights into how they navigate an uncertain environment as single freelancer.

Social capital has been suggested as key component for career success (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013). Their personal network offers them the potential for referrals to new projects as well as information about new project opportunities. In addition to that, their personal responsibility for new projects awards a central place for building their reputation through networking (Gandini, 2016; S. L. Jack, 2005). They need to build their reputation through delivering high-quality work as well as keeping their professional knowledge up to date and managing their set of relations in such a way that new projects will be granted to them. Working on their own, freelancers possibly seek to find some of these needs in their network interactions with others, thereby emphasizing multiple needs from interpersonal interaction.

Despite this important role for social capital in the work life of freelancers, research has overlooked this context when it comes to understanding what role networking plays for freelancers and their approach to do so. Being self-employed may prioritize personal and informal approaches (Brawley & Pury, 2017) that in turn may foster trust (Porter & Woo, 2015), that is important for granting projects. Personal components in networks are known in the literature in the start-up phase of a venture (Hite & Hesterly, 2001) and with existing and emotionally close relations. Socially embedded and strong ties are known to provide more information, but at the same time this information can be redundant. This implies that they do not provide new information. Yet, freelancers need bridges that connect them to new others who advocate their reputation. Hence, it could be that this need for good reputation – or branding (Gandini, 2016) – drives the networking approaches of freelancers. Thus, the question remains how freelancers participate in networking and what is its role in their work?

To further the understanding of networking approaches of freelancers and what it means to them, I conducted a case study with freelancers employed in the Dutch

infrastructure sector. Their participation in a professional network provides new theoretical insights.

## **2.3 Method**

### *2.3.1 Research context and case selection*

For this research I am interested what professional network membership means to freelancers and their approach to networking. To gain insights in this, I selected a professional network that freelancers participated in. Prior employment relations made me familiar with a particular network and the philosophy of its members. As I wanted to get deep insights in the phenomenon of networking, I employed a case study. Case study research offers the potential for extensive empirical descriptions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), usually relying on multiple sources of data (Yin, 1994). The immersion in the local context provides theories that are usually accurate, testable and interesting (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The members of this network, called NET for the purposes of this study, are employed in temporary projects in the Dutch infrastructure sector and are personally responsible for acquiring new projects. NET was founded in 2009 to structure professional relations that were developed over years of joint project work in the same industry. Therefore some professionals go a long way back, while others only recently joined NET. The mission of NET is to strive to be colleagues “new style”, to share knowledge and connect socially. The members work in the same industry, gather for professional courses, take excursions and exchange knowledge. Membership involves a yearly tuition fee. For the members NET is part of their larger personal network:

NET is just part of the network I have built around me. Within NET there are also smaller networks, but outside of NET I have an even broader network. (R4)<sup>4</sup>

The members of NET are employed in large temporary projects in the Dutch infrastructure sector ranging from 5-500 million euros. They occupy positions of project manager, project controller, legal advisor, manager stakeholders, technical manager and so on. Their employment can vary from short term advice to long term responsibility of the entire project. The granting of new projects happens on personal title, which displays the importance of a good reputation and being known by others. Often these professionals were formerly employed at a company or with the government but decided to become self-

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis quotes from informants are followed by the letter R and the number of the interview from which the quote is obtained.



employed at a particular point. The appendix contains an overview of the interviewed members of NET and their duration of self-employment. Based on their experience in the industry as well as in acquiring projects, these professionals have built a mature network over time.

### *2.3.2 Data collection*

Through contacting former professional contacts and conducting an introductory presentation, I was granted access to this research site. Data collection ran from February 2014 to November 2014. The primary data consists of 21 semi-structured interviews, in which informants were selected through convenience sampling (please see the Appendix for an overview of the interview characteristics). The appointments for interviews were made during network meetings, through sending e-mails or by telephone. Two professionals explicated not wanting to participate in an interview. I stopped conducting interviews after I reached theoretical saturation. This implies that the remaining 10 members of NET were not interviewed. Because of my familiarity with the context as well as acquaintance with few of the informants, I have applied emotional interviewing approach (Alvesson, 2011). I started with making a connection with the informant before the interview started through small-talk, introducing myself, seeking similarities in background and so on. Consequently, and because of the engagement of the informants, the interviews can be characterized by high levels of authenticity. They provide in-depth insight in the mechanisms that characterize NET and the perceptions held by its members. Interview protocol in the Appendix provides insight in the questions that guided the interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted on average 65 minutes. They were tape recorded with permission of the informant and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word.

In addition, I attended several meetings of NET to observe interactions, participated in formal and informal conversations during these meetings and made notes on the purposes of the interactions. Access was granted to mission statements, background documents and internal communications device, which gave insight in the stated purposes of NET and how its members interacted. This reliance on multiple data sources ensures in-depth findings that are more easily generalizable (Berthod et al., 2016; Geertz, 1994). These observations started shortly before the data collection in November 2013 and ended halfway 2015.

### 2.3.3 *Data analysis*

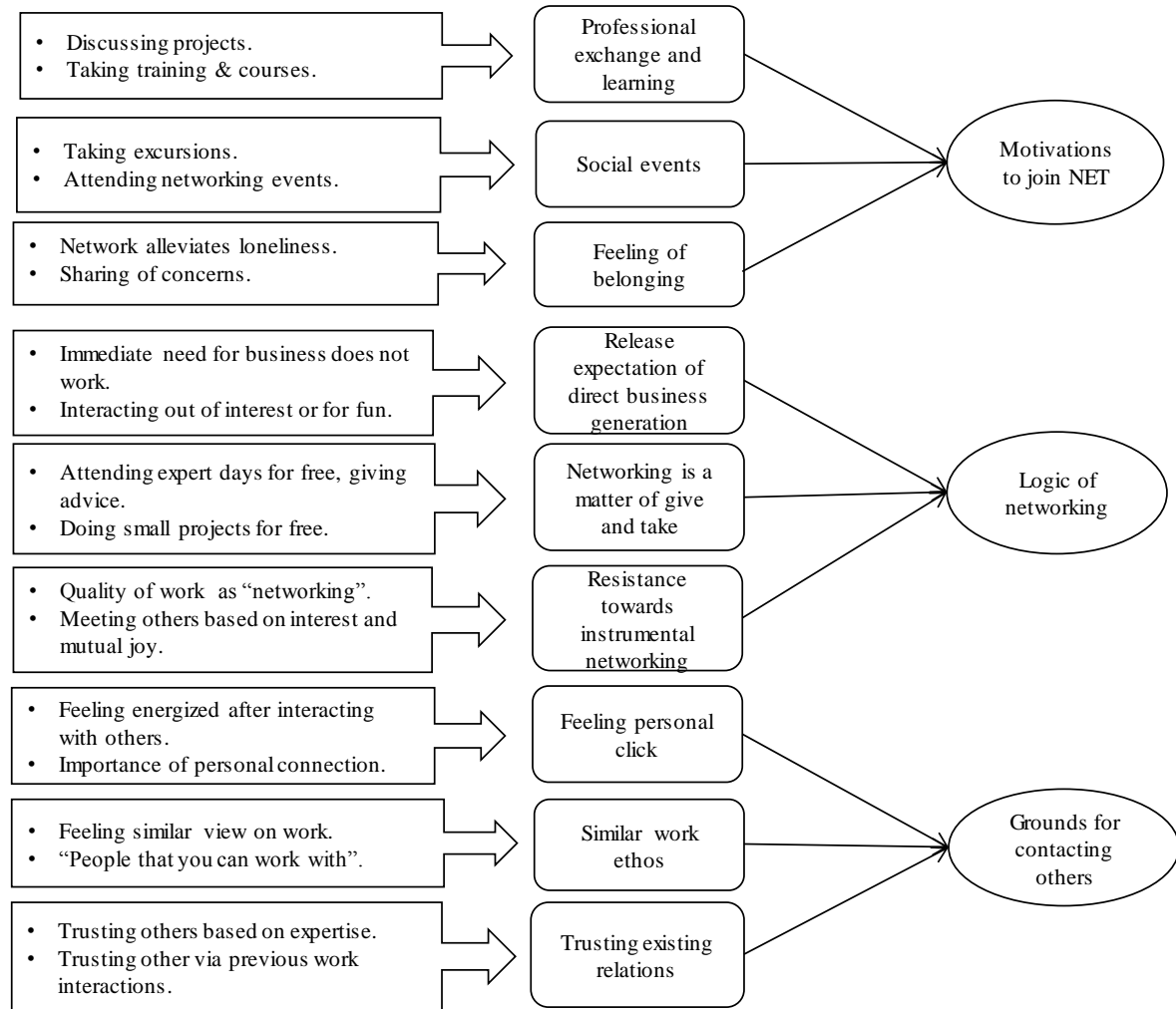
The interview data has been analyzed using program Atlas.ti. The coding focused on the meaning of NET for freelancers and their approach to networking. Two research assistants worked on their own projects and started to code the data. The research methodology suggested by Gioia and colleagues (2013) has been used to analyze the data. Using this framework for analyzing qualitative data starts with open coding. This implies that pieces of text were coded with labeled that closely adhere to informant-centric terms. This results in first order concepts that are subsequently organized in second-order or theory-centric themes. When these second order themes show particular patterns, aggregate dimensions are constructed, which represent the header categories in the findings section.

The overall emergent data structure provides both insights into motives for networking as well as freelancers' approach to do so. In doing so, it shows two elements that are in my opinion intertwined and need to be presented in the same paper. The theoretical contribution of the paper has been developed in a back-and-forth between the data and existing writings on the topic of study (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This ultimately resulted in a data structure that is presented in Table 2.1. and Figure 2.1. The data structure is based on interview data while insights that emerged from the observations, small-talks and professional documents were used as background information in developing this paper's argument. Through presenting both the data from the interviews as well as from observations, a more complete understanding of the rationales to engage in NET is presented.

Table 2.1. *Exemplary quotes*

Aggregate dimensions (#)	Second order concepts (#)	Exemplary quote
Motivations to join NET (52)	Professional exchange and learning (14)	People with a certain level of proficiency, whom I can ask for help if I need to. (R15)
	Social events (19)	I especially like the social component of having gatherings and making short trips together. (R20)
	Feeling of belonging (19)	It is nice to participate in a group so that you do not feel all alone. (R10)
Logic of networking (37)	No expectations of direct business generation (10)	You could get work out of it [NET] you know, and that would be a fringe benefit then. But please do not join because you expect multiple leads for assignments. (R19)
	Networking is give and take (13)	And sometimes I do something small for them, without sending an invoice. (R16)
	Resistance towards instrumental networking (14)	But this nasty thing of acquisition, networking and meetings, sharing business cards and so on, there is no need to that. And I love that I do not have to. (R16)
Grounds to interact with others (43)	Feeling personal click (19)	So in the end, I like to talk to people which give me energy back. So only if you notice that I'm giving something, but also getting something in return. (R11)
	Similar work ethos (13)	You have to get to know each other first, and then it becomes much more low-profile to discuss work together or call each other for advice. (...) You build trust over time, which makes it different from a situation where you get introduced to someone you've never met before. (R18)
	Trusting existing relations (11)	Mostly (...) through people with whom you've had pleasant cooperation in the past, or whom you know very well. I never approached a total stranger. Usually, there is some kind of barrow. (R15)

Figure 2.1. *Data structure*



## 2.4 Findings I: Freelancers and networking

Here I present the themes that comprise the networking approach of this group of freelancers immersed in professional network NET. I describe the Philosophy of NET, Motivations to join, Logic of networking and Grounds for interaction. I then move on to summarize these findings by suggesting how freelancers network through “seeking business friendships”, which they perceive as successful approach in this context. I will start with a description of the context of this network NET, to embed the findings.

### 2.4.1 *Philosophy of NET*

NET was founded in 2009 by two service professionals that started a consulting business. At arms-length of their company they visualized a network of extended relations of freelancers. They knew some freelancers through prior cooperation on previous projects in the Dutch infrastructure sector. As a consequence many of these relations were

longstanding and stretched from the professional domain into the private domain. The purpose of NET was a safe and warm place for the relatively 'lonely' self-employed service-professionals employed in temporary projects in the Dutch infrastructure sector. From this perspective the network started to attract members.

New members are introduced based on dyadic-relations of existing members. A potential member is brought to meetings of NET and can decide whether or not to join NET based on a personal evaluation of feeling at home with NET. Therefore, member growth of NET runs through personal click or perceived fit of the potential member. In this sense, network growth runs organically to the extent to which the introduced member likes the interactions at NET. These are often guided by inquiring which activities give members energy. Therefore the activities for the upcoming year are plenary discussed.

While rationales for interaction in NET were mainly based on trust and personal click, for some this was not enough: "*For me the professional component comes first with NET*" (R4). Therefore, some members had the wish to develop the professional side of the network more formally. Being self-employed some of these professionals showed interest in working together with others in projects. They argued that NET was in danger of only being a social rather than a business network and sought for approaches to jointly contact new clients. At the same time, during the year of observation no formal improvements were made with regard to this topic.

I would like to develop NET in a professional sense. So that we are able to attract projects from clients based on teams of freelancers. (R4)

Perhaps the structure and strong relationships among these freelancers did not facilitate this formalization in terms of business acquisition.

During one year about seven formal meetings are scheduled at Friday afternoon at a central location in the Netherlands. These meetings started with a plenary session in which a variety of topics is discussed. For example, how to proceed with the network, the desired number of members, a lecture of a guest-speaker, an update about an interesting project or else. After this plenary session there is a gathering with drinks and snacks in which members informally interact.

The members, who found it important to personally know each other, felt that the network was suffering from fast growth. NET started with a small number of professionals and has grown based on invitations on personal title over the last years to 35 members. Members raised questions as: "How could I know them personally? And: "What will happen to the culture if new others join too quickly?" In addition to that, the transition

from being a small-scale network to a larger network raised questions in terms of the mission and identity of the network. During meetings of NET questions on the direction and organization of NET were raised. During the so-called living room- meetings the mission of the network was point of discussion. Members felt a tension between connecting on personal title and being a formal professional network. After a year of observation this was still a point of discussion. This forms the context in which the interviews and observations were conducted.

#### *2.4.2 Motivations to join NET*

The data display three different motivations to participated in NET: (1) professional exchange and learning, (2) social activities and (3) feeling of belonging.

##### *Professional exchange and learning*

To start with, the freelancers view NET as a platform to exchange professional knowledge. This can be viewed as exchange of professional knowledge as the following member points out:

Keep each other posted on what happens in our professional world. (R19)

This professional exchange serves as motivator in the form of searching for feedback, input and advice from their peers as well as knowing other's expertise and being up to date with developments in the market. In this respect one member describes the fellow members at NET as follows:

A collection of people who you can rely on if you need knowledge or reflection. (R12)

Asking for advice from professionals that are employed in similar projects, provides members with new perceptions and ideas on how to approach their work when a hick-up is encountered.

In this way you can casually and informally share the problems you encounter in your work or decisions that you are unsure about. By talking to someone else, you find an answer much easier. (R7)

Seen from this perspective the exchange of professional knowledge on how to approach a situation best, comprises both personal development and professional development in the form of training programs on shared interests. One member describes this as follows:

I am not so much focusing on acquiring work, but more on personal development. You know, these are people in the same field, so you can ask them how they go about things. (R1) Another points at: What I also like a lot are the professional trainings that I can sign up for. (R18)

Therefore, members reported on different components of professional development and learning from others that they valued in their membership.

### *Social events*

As it shows, many members emphasize that professional gains are not the main motivator for engaging in networking events of NET. The social component and the social embedding of these professionals exchange is seen as particularly important. This implies that over business acquisition the social component and pleasant experience are primary to these freelancers' motivations. The other members are important for the fun experience of networking. This informant elaborates in general terms:

I always go [to networking events of NET] happily and, if possible, I will not miss them. Just because I really like the people and I enjoy being present. So I participate because I truly enjoy it and because I like seeing everybody and hearing what they are up to. Not necessarily for acquiring work. (R1)

Attending meetings of NET gives a happy feeling and a positive experience. For instance, this project manager was also part of another network in he did not have this experience and in which business was primary goal for members. Please see the following quote:

Last week, I had dinner with X. We talked for two hours and afterwards I was sitting in my car with a big smile on my face, thinking: wow, what a great conversation! That's just fantastic. And I often have this feeling when I attended a NET meeting. I talk to lots of people and afterwards I can say that I really enjoyed myself. (R11)

The social component also illustrates the overlap between personal and professional spheres of life as highlighted by one informant:

Some of these guys have been present at my wedding, fifteen years ago. I am not getting any work out of them for years now. It is just fun. (R19) Another member notes: For me, it is really more of a social instead of a business-oriented network. (R13)

The social embedding of the relationships for many members of NET is related to the duration of the relationship. Many go a long way back when working together in infrastructure projects between 1990-2010. The intimacy of demanding project work, makes that some of these members know each other quite well. In these relationships the social embedding is more important than the professional exchange:

Those are people with whom you can easily continue a conversation you started a year ago, just as if it were yesterday. That is because these are very longstanding relationships. You have a shared past to draw on. (R9)

For a large part memberships are grounded in enjoying interpersonal interactions at NET.

### *Feeling of belonging*

On top of the social embedding and professional exchange, I observed that membership of NET also meant belonging to a group for freelancers. For some it gave a feeling of belonging, a feeling of being connected to others. Of particular importance here is the emotional closeness that is felt with the other member. Many assert that it feels good to belong to NET when being a freelancer:

I work as an independent freelancer since 1990, so that's a long time, and I notice that belonging to something, or having a connection just feels good. (...) It just feels good being there. (R8)

It seems that this sense of belonging can alleviate some of the loneliness that is associated with being self-employed. One informant elaborates on this as follows:

As an independent freelancer, you are kind of a lone wolf, a drifter. A wanderer if you will, since you do not have any colleagues. (R20)

In this respect, another member describes membership of NET as something to hold on to:

Something to hold on to. (...) So that you are not alone all by yourself in this turbulent world. (R6)

The feeling of connectedness also gives a feeling of being safe with others. Therefore beyond professional exchange and social exchange the members of NET also emphasize a way of interacting that they describe as a feeling of belonging that is important to them.

### *2.4.3 Logic of networking*

In addition to these different motives to join NET, freelancers put forward ideas about a successful networking approach in this context. These entailed: (1) let go of expectation of direct business generation (2) networking is a matter of give and take as well as that they often held a certain (3) resistance towards instrumental networking and argued that the quality of their work needed to serve as networking signal. These perceptions are related to the general held belief that they did not know upfront which relationships would materialize into new projects or valuable contacts, thereby pointing at a role for uncertainty in networking.

### *No expectations of direct business generation*

The members of NET agree on a basic assumption towards networking: acquiring work is not ought to be the main goal of networking. They do not expect direct business outcomes from social interactions at NET, nor from their other contacts outside the network. They emphasize that from experience they know that it is unclear whether and how business will



emerge through relationships, and therefore focus on interacting and maintaining relationships with people they find interesting. Whether this results in new projects acquisition somewhere down the road is seen as additional benefit of the networking process – the relationship comes first. This informant illustrates this as follows:

I do not know if this will result in anything, but that is not my angle anyway (...) it is not that calculative. But in the end, I do think that business might ensue from it. (R5)

Another member emphasized this as follows:

Of course, you could approach this as having a network with all kinds of people in the right positions. (...) But in my view, that is not what it is about. It is about fun people, people who get you thinking and with whom you have interesting conversations. And the fact that this sometimes leads to a new project is more like an additional benefit. (R13)

So it seems that interactions at NET and elsewhere are viewed as merely socially embedded informational exchanges through which in the future new leads may emerge, but when and how is uncertain. This informant characterizes here behavior as follows:

I am constantly having lunch or dinner with people and I am drinking excessive amounts of coffee, with all kinds of people I find interesting. I have no idea if it will ever bring me something. Probably it will not, but I just think it's interesting. (R4)

In order to allow these leads to emerge these professionals emphasize the personal relation and personal reputation as they believe this is the basis on which future work will be granted to them.

#### *Networking is a matter of give and take*

In relation to the above, the members of NET often view networking as a matter of give and take. Informants emphasized that networking is zero-sum game. This implies that if everyone wants to get something out of it, no one gets anything. Therefore is it important to invest time and effort in NET as one member explained:

A network fully depends on give and take. It is not clear what you will get in return, so you must find it worthwhile and invest time and effort. (R4)

In relation to the view that networking is a zero-sum game, informants wanted to contribute to NET as is illustrated by this member:

If I am part of a network, I want to have an active role in it. So I do not want to consume only, but I also want to contribute myself. (R14)

This giving was marked by certain boundaries set by the member, as for instance illustrated by this informant:

Of course you only have to do so to a certain extent, to avoid becoming an errand boy for everybody. But yes, this is how you help each other, and doing so creates new opportunities, which are also opportunities for me. (R16)

This idea of give and take can also take place within a particular conversation. During interactions with others both members engage in the conversation through being honest, by revealing something of themselves while the other person does the same. With this level of interaction members go beyond the usual small talk network relations. A member highlights this as follows:

The real conversations are the ones with reciprocal interaction. You know, when you reveal something of yourself and then get something in return. (...) Those are the nicest conversations, where a conversation becomes a real encounter. (R11)

The importance of give and take is illustrated by the belief that to make a personal network relation function you have to grant each other favors, without necessarily expecting something in return. This is illustrated by this member:

I firmly believe that you have to heartily grant each other things, without saying: "Think of me in the future, because I am helping you now." (R19)

The members also argue that within this market of infrastructure projects the goodwill built on their personal title is important. As "*an absolute goodwill market*" (R19) this personal style of reputation building is important. This is described as follows:

In the end, it is all about who knows you and who is willing to grant you something out of goodwill. (R8)

These beliefs influence how networking needs to be done in their perception.

#### *Resistance to networking: serve your network through your work*

With respect to the perceptions regarding networking, the third theme that emerges from the data concerns the resistance towards networking behaviors that are primarily aimed at acquiring work. Members of NET referred to this type of networking interactions as 'leaving a bad taste in my mouth'. Although some emphasize a direct approach when in need of work, such as for instance going through LinkedIn profiles or calling contacts from previous employment relations, networking has a negative connotation with many of the members of NET. At the same time these freelancers do not appreciate others operating like this either. The data support this idea, through for instance this quote:

If you only call people because you need something from them, it just does not feel right. (R7)

Some members are even hesitant to contact former employers, because they think that this initiative can be explained as work seeking behaviors which they want to avoid:

I even hesitate to make leisure appointments with potential clients if I feel they may think I am not contacting them for fun, but just for work. (R6)

Multiple members of NET hold the belief that the work should be generated through delivering high-quality work instead of networking strategies:

I am very hesitant in that respect. So please just serve your network through your work and your performance, and then they will find you anyway. (...) Not all kinds of other strategies. I do not appreciate being approached in such a manner either. (R12)

Some say that they can see the value of networking events, but that they did not feel comfortable with these interactions. The approach that replaced these networking events and getting known, was to deliver high-quality work and being trustworthy. Therefore having done business together creates a bond that shows the value of others.

If you have worked together with others, you know you can trust them. You know what they have to offer and you want to involve them in new projects because it just works well. (R7)

Through doing business together, members build a certain reputation, that they deem important in the market they operate in. One member describes this as follows:

This way, you build a certain name or reputation and that is really important. People will start calling you. (R16)

This final quote summarizes the emphasis on doing well as signal to your network:

There is no better marketing [in this field] than performing your job well. (R11)

The common held perception was that networking needed to be accompanied by delivering good work.

#### *2.4.4 Grounds for interacting with others*

Based on these perceptions about networking and motivations to join NET three themes emerged from the data as grounds for selecting network contacts: (1) feeling a personal click (2) similar work ethos and (3) trusting existing relations based on common previous experience. As such these members sought to build a network of similar others – others they felt attracted too based on personal motives. These grounds form an important part of their strategy towards networking. While many of the references encompass selecting existing contacts from their mature network some also referred to contacting new others.

##### *Feeling a personal connection*

The data shows that members consider a personal connection or ‘click’ to be a prime basis for selecting their network contacts. Numerous informants explained this personal click simply as the mutual feeling of getting along and liking each other. Some mention

‘positive energy’ or an effect of mutual energizing as part of the personal connection. For instance, one member states:

The basis is just a personal connection. Those are the people I have fun with and that give me energy by being around them. (R6)

Another member emphasizes the importance of a personal connection as follows:

When there is positive energy between me and the other person, when there is a click. When everything is self-evident and interaction is easy. So yeah, a click or connection. (R14)

The informants emphasized that this feeling of getting along and having a connection is not based on professional characteristics, but merely exists on a personal and intuitive level. In this respect, some freelancers discuss a form of feeling of trust being present. One member discusses this as follows:

Purely based on, initially, a personal click. I avoid people who get in my “allergy field”. So rather quickly I have to get a feeling with people that says: shaking hands is enough. A sort of trust. (R19) Another informant confirms: Having a good feeling with someone, like we trust each other. (R13)

Although a personal connection is not directly work-related, the data shows its importance for professional cooperation.

### *Similar work ethos*

The second theme that emerged from the data as a selection ground captures the common professional attitude and cultural fit that these freelancers are looking for in their network contacts. A common attitude towards their work and work field fosters a similar kind of connection or ‘click’ as described in the former theme. This time however on a professional instead of a personal level. It seems that these freelancers are selecting people in their network who have a similar view on the projects they are involved in and feel that they are on the same page. For instance, one member asserts that he selects others who:

Fit the conception you have about your work. (...) Who advocate a similar approach or method. (R8) Others speak about: a click in professional thinking and operating. (R9) or: they fit my way of working. (R20)

Some members label these professional commonalities as having “*the same style or culture*” (R11). For instance, the data shows examples of a culture of being down to earth and a professional culture of personal knowing as ground for interacting.

### *Trusting existing ties' professional expertise*

The third selection ground is proven professional expertise based on previous professional interaction. The data show that members select network contacts based on their assessment of these people's professional qualities and knowledge. One member explains:

It is a combination of your assessment of someone's professional skills and someone's integrity. For me, the factors of craftsmanship and expertise are important, not power or position. (R16)

The members highlight that past experience in working together gives them insight in the professional qualities of others.

If you have worked together with others, you know you can trust them. You know what they have to offer and you want to involve them in new projects because it just works well. (R7)

In this respect, members are well aware that they are building reputation through their work performance. As one member points out, the market served by these freelancers is relatively small and words travel fast:

In this way, you build a certain name or reputation. That is really important. Then people start calling you. (R16)

Previous work relations were important since they signaled the expertise of the self-employed professional.

## **2.5 Findings II: Interpersonal networking through “seeking business friendships”**

This study examined what being part of a professional network offered to freelancers and how they engage in networking themselves. From the above it seems that NET provides these freelancers meaning through professional exchange, social events and a feeling of belonging. Some of the members of NET have labeled the professional relations they have as business friendships – referring to a personal connection in professional relations. The overlap of affective and instrumental components of one relationship has been previously been discussed in the literature (S. L. Jack, 2005; Porter & Woo, 2015; Vissa, 2012) in which relations span both professional and private domains (Ingram & Zou, 2008). This case study shows that business friendships are sought for as appropriate approach to obtain referrals and exchange professional information in a context in which projects are granted on personal title. Also, the lack of formal colleagues makes social relations important for these freelanced professionals. Their descriptions show that these relations are more than economic exchange, but instead also serve the purpose of learning, fun and a feeling of belonging.

This case study describes that this personally felt connection can emerge both in mature stages of the relation – i.e. through joint project work - as well as an evaluation mechanism for who to approach next. This affective component of professional relations can be understood as a form of homophily in which like-minded individual are attracted to each other (Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003), but extends the demographic attributes by which homophily is often conceptualized (e.g., Vissa, 2011). In this case it includes an experiential form of interpersonal attraction or affect (e.g., Forbes, Borchert, Zellmer-Bruhn, & Sapienza, 2006) and intra-subjective expressive motivations that are identity confirming (Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). Members describe this phenomenon as follows:

Professionally developed friendships and working relationships. (R9)

This private connection may pave the way for professional exchange. One member illustrates how this works – there is a kind of intuitive understanding that makes that he trusts work from this contact at some point:

We discuss our current business, but also projects from the past and what he learned from those. And also challenges he faces today, things I discovered and ideas I have. (...) It is not acquisition in any way. (...) It is just drinking coffee, we both have fun and after an hour we both go our ways. (...) I just enjoy that, but I also know that if he needs me in the future, he will call. And neither of us actually expresses this literally, because it is almost self-evident. (R14)

Consequently, this perspective is not totally devoid of instrumentalism, but rather seeks it implicitly through sincere interactions. Another member describes that this connection forms an efficient base for exchange:

A private connection is just very important. If you know and like the other person, you are able to work together much more effectively. (R7) Or: The best professional contacts are also the ones with which you have the best private connection. (...) A real connection, like you have with friends. (...) What I mean is a genuine connection on an emotional level. (R14)

These business friendships are perceived to be the success formula for members of NET - the type of network contact that brings a lot of business:

He is my buddy. We discuss the world together, all kinds of things, and also our work of course. And this also brought me a lot of business. He is just someone with whom I have a really good connection in all possible ways. And we also see each other a lot in our private lives. So it is also just fun. (R15)

The importance of these kind of relations in this context is exemplified that by the fact that personal knowing is a condition to give referrals:

I only want to recommend people I know personally and whom I deem capable. (...) And this is only possible if you know someone really well, for instance if you have worked together in the past. (R7) Another member notes: I will never recommend someone if I am not sure about their competences. (R11)

Therefore giving others a heads up for job opportunities can be seen as a result of the close and trusted connections that are developed through the networking process, instead of the direct goal of this process itself. For the members of NET, outcomes of business opportunities are regarded as additional benefit of their membership.

Delivering high quality work is seen as form of reputation building as well as a condition of business friendships. Freelancers emphasize that networking is a matter of give and take and that in order to build their reputation, they need to let go of direct business expectations. They believe that it is unclear whether and how new business is generated, but have chosen a particular approach for interacting with others. What they did not elaborate on is how these “*friends from the past*” (R9) are potentially constraining in reaching out to new others.

## **2.6 Discussion and conclusions**

### *2.6.1 Theoretical contributions*

In what follows I outline the contributions of this paper. First, this case study offers a networking logic of “seeking business friendships” that deviates from instrumental approaches. In particular it puts forward an approach in which the personal component of the relation and the delivery of high-quality work comes first. In this networking approach networking outcomes emerge through ongoing interaction and are fostered by taking a give and take stance (Grant, 2013; Van Gelderen, 2013) and a letting go of direct business expectations. It adds to work that has criticized networking for being overly calculative (Klyver et al., 2011) and makes context an important component of studying the networking approach (Berthod et al., 2016; S. L. Jack, 2005, 2010).

Second, it contributes to the emerging literature on the integration of psychology and social networks. The motivations of freelancers in this context span both the professional and private domain. The importance of cognition is illustrated by the beliefs that are held about how networking works in the Dutch infrastructure sector. Referrals are given to those who are cognitively activated (Menon & Smith, 2014) based on proven professional expertise. Diversity in social networks are either conceptualized by function (Blau, 1964) or by the strength of ties (Granovetter, 1973). This study shows that freelancers distinguish others based on who they perceive as ‘interesting’, which points at an a-priori cognitive and affective differentiation of who to interact with. The described personal connection possibly links to perceived high-quality of relations at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). The affective component reported on by freelancers in this context generally improves our

understanding of the psychology of networking (Casciaro et al., 2015; Porter & Woo, 2015; Vissa, 2012).

Third, it contributes to the literature that seeks to understand how freelancers work and aim to be successful in the context they operate in (Born & Witteloostuijn, 2013; Gandini, 2016). For freelancers networking is more inclusive than a need based approach, as it also involves social and personal purposes. The nature of their work and this particular context makes them award value to business friendships, overlaying professionals contacts with a need for personal exchange (S. L. Jack, 2005; Vissa, 2012) that would possibly be otherwise met by colleagues. For some this is met by being part of the network while for others this is also met by other contacts. This view contrasts prior work that has emphasized the need for political skill or social competence to acquire resources (Fang, Chi, Chen, & Baron, 2015; Tocher et al., 2015)

Finally, this study contributes to the literature that describes when and how expressive ties are important for acquiring resources. The importance of embeddedness of social relations (Granovetter, 1985) is relevant for venture start-up (Hite & Hesterly, 2001; S. L. Jack, 2005), as well as in mature phases of professional relationships (Porter & Woo, 2015). The findings presented here both support the view that mature relationships possibly include a private component as well as that these can be created with new professional contacts. In addition to being a feature that emerges through experience, I suggest that it can also be a preference of the freelancer to engage in these kinds of relationships that mingle private and professional spheres.

### *2.6.2 Alternative explanations*

The finding of seeking business friendships could also been described through alternative mechanisms. First, business friendships can be exemplary of this specific context and serve as a selection mechanism of this network rather than as interpersonal networking practices of freelancers. In that case a cultural explanation of networking would do. Yet since these professionals vary in length of self-employment, have individual networks next to NET as well as the extent to which they share a similar past, I have chosen not to opt for this interpretation of the data. Alternatively, this personal approach to networking can also be seen as individual level explanation. For instance, Bensaou and colleagues (2014) offered insights in different types of strategies. Seeking business friendships can perhaps also be attributed to personality characteristics. My hunch about this is that this sample of professionals was above average sensitive to stimuli and preferred real interaction over



means to ends relations. To further this potential possibility future research needs to delve into networking practices in relation to particular personality characteristics.

### *2.6.3 Future research and limitations*

As with every research design, the case study design chosen for this study has its limitations. The particular case selected offers insights in how networking is done, but is perhaps not representative for all freelancers. Therefore, other studies can evaluate the motivations and perceptions of freelancers as well to get insights in the meaning and logic that are attached to networking. Following up on the ontological perspective taken in this study, more studies can take an interactionist perspective on social networking (Tocher et al., 2015) and examine how these perceptions affect real interactions with organizational actors.

In addition, the findings of this study can also be interpreted as that like-minded professionals are attracted to each other. This would imply that the findings are merely a result of a type of professional that has certain values and preferences with respect to social interaction. The findings resemble the ideas ‘Purists’ have about networking and a dislike of instrumental networking approaches (Bensaou et al., 2014) and that networking can make feel dirty (Casciaro et al., 2014). Therefore, future research can identify whether particular professionals hold particular beliefs towards networking.

Another interesting and shortly touched upon subject is the role affect plays in social network relations. A particular line of research has highlighted high-quality connections to be important for well-being and learning (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). It seems that the freelancers referred to high-quality relations when mentioning business friendships. Future work can operationalize affect as perceived joy or energy a particular relation might give (Owens et al., 2016). This work can then propose different layers of social interaction at work that may yield different outcomes. Recently, positive work relations have been seen as conduit for giving to others, friendship and personal growth (Colbert et al., 2016). Future work can examine whether in order to perceive these outcomes, these relationships hold certain characteristics, going beyond the general strong and weak tie distinction.

#### *2.6.4 Conclusion*

This study employed a case study technique to understand perceptions and motives with which freelancers engage in social networking behaviors. I relied on multiple data sources as well as autobiographical knowledge to unravel how networking works in the minds of freelancers. I showed that freelancers refer to “seeking business friendships” that overlay the personal with the professional as desirable approach to navigate towards new projects and to socially engage with like-minded professionals. Networking is understood as uncertain endeavor, through which somewhere down the road outcomes can emerge. The delivery of high-quality work is important in this respect. This makes that these freelancers are less goal-directed in acquiring direct business outcomes and do emphasize that networking is a matter of give and take. Consequently, networking for freelancers is both more informal and personal, as well as highlights the need for professional expertise. I hope that this study accelerates an interest in understanding the different functions and ways of networking.